

The Manipulation and Exploitation of Nationalism

The need to call a place home is a very familiar desire. National citizenship can be thought of as a unique status which offers people unbridled access to this peace of mind. Because the nation is the source of this comfort, it is not surprising that people take pride in it. But nationalism stems from the abstract, purely ideological form of a nation. This concrete-less nationalism has been a key facet in the American government's decisions about the economy, domestic spending, and most notably, foreign policy. Many, if not most, countries involved in wars during the last century maintained public support through nationalism. However, nationalism not only has arbitrary roots, but in the case of politics, it is often falsely fashioned in the minds of citizens so that governments can forcibly impose political will. The United States is certainly no exception; rather, it is right now, the perfect example. This paper will explore how what I will call artificial nationalism is encouraged through democratic rhetoric, and how George W. Bush uses artificial nationalism and moralistic rhetoric post 9-11 to legitimize certain foreign policies to the American people.

The arbitrariness of the nation is best understood by establishing nationalism as connected to and a key part of the nation itself. The first link in this connection is how people from different communities initially distinguish themselves from each other. In his essay "The Nation Form," Etienne Balibar explores how "the people" are "produced," that is, how people are originally brought together to form a large community, the root of a nation. Balibar grants that initially a tangible form of unity among people, through a written constitution, is established. However, Balibar states that "a model of [the

people's] unity must 'anticipate' that constitution...for example, in collective mobilization in wartime, that is, in the capacity to confront death collectively" (94). This claim demonstrates how the maintenance of a nation relies on the unity of a single group of people. Clearly, Balibar also alludes to why and how politicians might use nationalism to gain support in times of war. But more importantly, this "collective mobilization" implies that people from one group must mobilize against people from another group. Thus part of what the nation form does is distinguish one community from another. Although this provides people the comfort of calling a place home, it also results in a lack of unity among people internationally.

Institutions that contribute to the creation of the nation form and nationalism include families and schools. The family is important most obviously because it is where the nation is maintained and reproduced (through the creation of children). Another important aspect of families to the nation is the idea of family values. As parents pass on a legacy of strong nationalistic beliefs onto children, everlasting generations of people who carry nationalism as a core belief comprise the nation. This relates also to how public education, another critical aspect to the nation form, plays a critical part in teaching children nationalism. Public schools undoubtedly teach children in ways that play into nationalistic beliefs; the most prominent example being the Pledge of Allegiance. The Pledge of Allegiance is a verbal manifestation of nationalistic ideals and its ritualistic recitation among young school children impresses these ideals into the minds of the nation's youth. Other examples include the biases of American textbooks and teachers supporting their own country and the resulting lack of critical analysis of American policies. Given that families and schools reproduce nationalistic values, and

that the nation can only survive by producing children and educating them so that they are a functional part of their society, then nationalism is inherent in the nation form. Therefore, politicians have good incentive to exploit nationalism in matters of foreign policy as it is always present within the population to be called upon.

The usefulness of nationalism is not in question, though. The more significant question is how and why governments would use such a strong ideology that exists among all the people in ways other than those that directly help the nation. First, the nationalism inherent in citizens results in pride in most aspects of the nation. In America this is most obvious with the hegemony of democracy. Americans' nationalism leads to the universal acceptance of their government, because nationalism and pride in democracy are intricately tied. Second, politicians have personal agendas that differ from the priorities of the public. Therefore some politicians with "flexible moral fibers" exploit nationalism to gain support for their policies as it is one of the few unifying traits among people of a nation. Gerald Sussman explains this exploitation in "Myths of Democracy Assistance," in which he provides an example of how political rhetoric extracts Americans' nationalism. Sussman's article analyzes how American politicians with strictly neoliberal¹ goals exploit nationalism to attain the public's approval for what would otherwise be seen as radical policies. Sussman discusses how within the last thirty years, American politicians have taken the initiative in placing neoliberal governments in countries where valid forms of governments virtually do not exist, at least according to these same American policy makers. These acts are disguised under the term "democracy assistance." The phrase "democracy assistance" is used because it appeals to

¹ Neoliberalism is an ideology supporting economies free of government interference (especially transnationally) and the theory that nations prosper most when applying laissez-faire policies.

the previously discussed American pride in democracy. Specifically, Sussman focuses on how “democracy assistance” is a term “rhetorically employed to overpower nationalist and socialist resistance to foreign economic and cultural domination” (1). Here Sussman explains American foreign policy as simply a series of invasions installing neoliberal, pro-American governments in foreign countries. These actions are then rhetorically masked as “spreading democracy.” By demonstrating how politicians use rhetoric emphasizing democracy when they are, in fact, satisfying the interests of the few economic leaders in America, Sussman demonstrates one reason politicians exploit nationalism. This political strategy is useful to politicians because it seems obvious that people should support the government’s actions when they involve “spreading democracy,” even when no such thing is happening. Furthermore, by titling an action as “democracy assistance” it would seem that those opposed to said action would be opposed to the entire idea of democracy. As emphasized by Balibar, the distinctions different populations make between themselves is one root of nationalism. However, nationalism is how neoliberal politicians gain support for foreign policies which call for actions that would otherwise be interpreted as contemporary colonialism. Such policies exacerbate the distinctions between people of different nations by creating divisions inherent to transnational wars. These divisions between people during wars, invasions and occupations reinforce nationalism much like the divisions discussed by Balibar do and thus nationalism is never depleted within a population. This recycling of nationalism, war, and division between populations is greatly advantageous to politicians willing to employ the discussed rhetorical strategies.

Politicians seeking citizens' approval to make moral decisions is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1940's the United States and other global powers have interfered with or completely overthrown foreign governments in the name of the moral need to "spread democracy." But in the past five years, Americans have been more than saturated with the moral rhetoric of American politicians. The use of moralistic rhetoric is just an alternative way of exploiting nationalism in Americans and can be one of the most powerful tools in a politician's artillery. Nationalism and the common morals of a country go hand-in-hand. The unity that Balibar discussed among people in a community relies on some shared set of morals that are both reflected explicitly (the Bill of Rights, for example) and inexplicitly (to cut in the grocery store line is wrong). Much like pride in the national form of government (democracy) is implicit in nationalism, the common morals of a nation are intertwined with nationalism. In "American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War," Paul T. McCartney focuses on how George W. Bush's rhetoric exploits and imposes American nationalism to support his foreign policy. Despite the deeply rooted common morals among Americans, diversity in ethics and philosophies exist within the American population and the imposition of nationalism is targeted against people who have values conflicting with those of the current government. By referring to some morals as "American morals," hegemonic values that not all citizens share are established as the standard. Thus, those with differing values are titled as un-American. In his article, McCartney discusses the cause of strong American pride in morals: "the United States has always maintained both a sweeping identification with the whole of humanity and an insular preoccupation with its own lofty distinctiveness, and it has used this paradoxical combination as the basis for

claiming its righteous entitlement to lead the world” (1). This explains the common American belief that, as the global moral leaders, Americans have a responsibility to spread their beneficence to the world (a belief that is clearly intertwined with American nationalism). This is the precise conviction George Bush seeks to exploit through his rhetoric.

George W. Bush’s speech made only one day after the 9-11 attacks contains explicit examples of national and moralistic rhetoric. I will use this speech to explain how Bush uses morality as a rhetorical device and how this relates to nationalism. On September 12, 2001 George Bush said,

The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war. This will require our country to unite in steadfast determination and resolve. Freedom and democracy are under attack...This enemy attacked not just our people, but freedom-loving people everywhere in the world... This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail. (Para. 5)

Claiming that “freedom loving people everywhere” were attacked, Bush appeals to nationalism to create a divide between people who support freedom and those who don’t. This is similar to the divide among different people’s that constitutes a nation, as described by Balibar. Consequently, should people choose to disagree with any of Bush’s policies, they will no longer be on the side of “freedom loving people.” And the American pride in morals as discussed by McCartney is the reason Bush’s strategy works so well; because democracy and freedom are such morally important concepts, people

must unequivocally fight for them. Through his rhetoric Bush turns this American pride in morals into legitimization of his foreign policy. The president was also undoubtedly appealing to morals through deliberate and repeated references to “our country” and “good and evil.” This moral rhetoric is identical to the language used years later that led Americans to believe they had a duty to “spread democracy” to Iraq. Bush’s exploitation of the hegemonic ideologies in America to go to war with a country which had no involvement with the original acts of injustice which triggered this rhetoric was clearly an effort to mask neoliberal globalization with “democracy assistance.”

Some claim that this moralistic rhetoric, especially in light of 9-11, was justified. This belief carries some weight because thousands of American civilians had been murdered by members of an organization with intentions of killing even more. A severely unethical act had been committed against Americans, thus it seems perfectly reasonable to appeal to morals to seek justice for those who had died. But it is important to recognize that this moralistic rhetoric was not used to seek justice for victims of 9-11, but instead to further the pursuit of neoliberal foreign governments (for example, the invasion of Iraq). Also, the President’s appeal to morals did not end with claims for seeking justice for victims of 9-11. George Bush’s speeches to the public years after 9-11 swarmed with pleads to “fight evil” as demonstrated by his reference to Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil,” countries that happen to be strictly against most American neoliberal policies such as tariff-free trade and minimized government involvement in economics.

Political rhetoric surrounds Americans. Not one day can pass without people hearing appeals to morals, pride in democracy, or nationalism. And when people fail to

understand the implications of such statements, the American public can be misled. The importance of comprehension of political speech cannot be underestimated. For example, George Bush's success with moralistic rhetoric has led to the new Department of Homeland Security (a term never before used in America), the Patriot Act, and most notably, the Iraq war. Until political rhetoric is understood and criticized, politicians will have the freedom to exploit nationalism with intentions that would normally be disapproved of by the public. If Americans truly have pride in themselves and in their country, they should not tolerate such senseless adherence to political will.

Works Cited

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